

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS, INTERPRETER OF THE NEGRO SOUL

BY J. V. NASH

THE most enduring of all literature springs from popular folklore. It is more than poetry or prose; it is philosophy, science, psychology, religion, history, ethics. It reflects the groping and aspiring soul of a people, in all its manifold reactions to its environment. It is the key which long generations of humble folk have been painfully forging, with which to unlock the mysterious door which opens into the Unseen.

This unpretending folklore is usually kept alive by word of mouth for many generations before a literary genius discovers it, gathers it together, separates the chaff from the wheat, and gives to the world the harvest of golden grain.

For many years there had been lying unrecognized in America a rich accumulation of folklore in the traditions, the songs, the tales, the proverbs, and the quaint philosophy of the plantation Negroes of the South. With the breaking up of the old patriarchal life and the advent of modern industrialism, this unique folklore was threatened with a speedy extinction. Doubtless it would have largely faded into oblivion, were it not for the fact that during the 'Seventies and 'Eighties there happened to be sitting at a desk in the office of the *Atlanta Constitution* the one man who possessed the tempermental qualifications to interpret this folklore, and the ability as a writer to mold it into literature of universal appeal.

So it came to pass that this neglected store of plantation folklore was given at last to the world in a series of inimitable stories which for more than forty years have been the delight of children, and of all who are youthful in spirit, wherever the English language is spoken.

These were the immortal "Uncle Remus" tales, which have

been recognized as perhaps the most vital literary productions springing out of American soil; and their creator, Joel Chandler Harris, lives on in the hearts of his readers.

Probably there never was a shyer author, or one who cared less for fame than did Harris. Martin Amorous, of Marietta, Ga., who knew him well, tells me: "'Uncle Remus' Harris was never a mixer among men or in society. I once took Mr. W. B. Judson, then owner and editor of the *Northwestern Lumberman*, of Chicago, at his request, to see and meet my friend, Joel Chandler Harris. We sat alongside of him in the *Constitution* office for upwards of an hour, and never got a word more than 'Yes' or 'No' from him. In taking leave, I couldn't help expressing my disappointment that he did not 'show himself off' to his caller, and I resolved that I should never introduce another to him. In his writing he was rich in philosophy and brilliancy, but in visitors' company he was a ruminator."

Yet this unresponsive exterior—which in such cases is often but a kind of defensive armor—concealed one of the kindest of natures and the heart of a little child. There was an underlying pathos in all of Harris's writings, traceable no doubt in part to the domestic circumstances of his babyhood, the loneliness of his life in the little village of Eatonton, where he was born December 8, 1848, and the cruel shock of war, which devastated his beloved South during the most impressionable years of his childhood. It has been said that only those who have tasted sorrow know the human heart. Harris knew the human heart.

Opportunities for formal schooling were scanty during Harris's youth. He has told in his own words of the incident that turned his life into the channel of journalism:

"It happened that I was in the post-office at Eatonton, reading the Milledgeville papers, when the first number of *The Countryman* was deposited on the counter where all the papers were kept. I read it through and came upon an advertisement which announced that the editor wanted a boy to learn the printer's trade. This was my opportunity, and I seized it with both hands."

He seems to have secured the position largely because of the excellent quality of his letter of application. The editor of this journal—which, by the way, was the only newspaper ever published on a plantation—was a certain J. A. Turner, owner of the Turnwold

plantation, nine miles away. He was a man of versatile talents. Besides managing a large plantation with over a hundred slaves, he was an accomplished scholar, an orator whose voice was known in the halls of the State Legislature, a writer of the literary school of Dr. Samuel Johnson, an omniverous reader and a book-lover whose library of 4,000 volumes was one of the finest in the South.

It was on this plantation, where he saw slavery as a kindly, patriarchal institution, that Harris absorbed his extraordinary first-hand acquaintance with Negro lore. In the little printing office he learned to set type, and during his leisure time he was free to browse in the well-stocked Turner library. From time to time he slipped into the columns of the paper little contributions of his own, signed "The Countryman's Devil." Under the friendly guidance of his employer, who directed his reading and criticised his first attempts at writing, he began his apprenticeship in literature.

But soon the peaceful life at Turnwold was rudely shattered and destroyed forever, for the plantation lay directly in the path of Sherman's devastating army. Cast adrift, on his own resources, while a boy in his teens, he became a struggling journalist. He worked for varying periods on newspapers and periodicals at New Orleans, at Macon, and at Forsythe, Ga. In 1879, at twenty-one, we find him filling the position of assistant editor and humorous columnist on the *Savannah Morning News*. The editor of this paper was an individual of some local importance, a Col. W. T. Thompson, noted at the time as the author of "Major Jones Courtship."

In Savannah several happy years were spent. Here he married, and here his family began growing up about him. Then, in the summer of 1876, the yellow fever broke out in the city. To save the lives of his two little children, he was faced with the necessity of leaving the pest-ridden sea-port and seeking refuge in the "high country." The young father's financial resources were slender, but even in such a tragic situation his saving sense of humor did not desert him. Humor and pathos are twins of Irish blood—and Harris was half Irish. On arriving in Atlanta he registered at the Kimball House as follows: "J. C. Harris, one wife, two bow-legged children, and a billious nurse."

In Atlanta, which was to become the scene of his life work, he renewed a youthful friendship with a rising young newspaper man,

the later well-known Henry W. Grady, at that time connected with the *Atlanta Herald*. About this time it happened that Capt. Evan P. Howell bought the controlling interest in the *Atlanta Constitution*, and engaged the services of Grady. Just before beginning work on the *Constitution*, Grady had encountered Harris on the streets of Atlanta. The result of the meeting was that almost immediately Harris was offered a position on the staff of the *Constitution* and accepted it.

Grady and Harris proved to be an admirable combination, in that they supplemented each other. As a contemporary wrote at the time: "On the *Constitution* we have two opposites—Harris and Grady. Harris is retiring, never speaking unless spoken to, but the words flow as freely from his pen as is possible. Grady, on the other hand, is gifted with extraordinary conversational powers; his tongue moves with the rapidity of a needle on a sewing machine. But when he attempts to write, he is less facile, and sometimes the words stick."

These two men loved the South with all the strength of their being; they dedicated their labors to the healing of the bitter wounds of war and reconstruction, and to the ushering in of a new and better era. Through the editorial columns of the *Constitution* they preached the gospel of progress and good-will, and they did much to win for the *Constitution* a national reputation as the leading mouth-piece of "The New South."

In the late 'Seventies, Sam. W. Ball was writing for the *Constitution* a series of Negro dialect sketches introducing a character known as Uncle Si. Upon Small's leaving the paper, Capt. Howell suggested to Harris that he try his hand at carrying on the series. But the character called Uncle Si did not appeal to Harris. He began casting about for another, and turned in memory to his old days on the Turnwold plantation. A magazine article which he read at this time apparently gave him some hints. He ruminated much, and out of his ruminations there gradually evolved "Uncle Remus, His Songs, Sayings and Fables."

The files of the *Constitution* show that under date of July 6, 1879, there appeared in its columns a short sketch by Harris, under the title "Uncle Remus and the Fourth." This was the humble and unheralded beginning of the "Uncle Remus" series. It was

followed in the course of the next few months by others in the same vein. On November 16 there appeared "Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and the Tar Baby." This made an extraordinary hit, and nation-wide interest began to be aroused in the series.

Harris now began to write a weekly "Uncle Remus" column in the *Constitution*. The popular response was instantaneous. It is said that "the reaction in the North was electric in its suddenness." In December, 1880, Harris brought out his first "Uncle Remus" book, which at once attained a wide sale and was recognized as a classic.

In an article which he contributed to Lippincott's magazine, entitled "An Accidental Author," Harris gives us in his own words the genesis of "Uncle Remus":

"*The Countryman* was published on a plantation, and it was on this and neighboring plantations that I became familiar with the curious myths and animal stories that form the basis of the volumes accredited to 'Uncle Remus.' I absorbed the stories, songs and myths that I heard, but I had no idea of their literary value until, some time in the 'Seventies, Lippincott's magazine published an article on the subject of Negro folklore, containing some rough outlines of some of the stories. This article gave me my clue, and the legends told by 'Uncle Remus' are the result."

Again, in a contribution to the London *Folklore Journal*, he said, regarding the stories:

"Not one of them is cooked, and not one, nor any part of one, is an invention of mine. They are all genuine folklore tales."

As to "Uncle Remus" himself, he was, according to Harris, "a human syndicate, I might say, of three or four old darkies whom I had known. I just whaloped them together into one person and called him 'Uncle Remus'." He added: "You must remember that sometimes the Negro is a genuine and an original philosopher."

The first book of "Uncle Remus" stories was brought out by D. Appleton & Co., the well known publishers of New York. "The representative of a New York publisher came to see me," Harris tells us, "and suggested an 'Uncle Remus' book. I was astonished, but he seemed to be in earnest, and so we picked out of the files of the *Constitution* enough matter for a little volume, and it was printed. To my surprise, it was successful."

The "Uncle Remus" stories, written over a period of many years, have been collected into five volumes. The famous "Tar Baby" story possibly had the widest appeal of any. It was translated into many foreign languages.

It has been said of Harris's stories that they were "simple enough to point a telling moral to a child, humorous enough to demand genuine laughter from middle age, and philosophical enough to please the jaded palate of those of advancing years."

Undoubtedly the secret power of these stories lies to a great extent in their keen analysis of character, the revelation of motives underlying life and action, and the homely philosophy which they embody. Through the veil of animal psychology many an illuminating sidelight on human foibles is given us.

Brer Rabbit is throughout the hero of the "Uncle Remus" stories. Though the rabbit is a shy, small, and humble creature, the Negro imagination finds no difficulty in transforming him into a personage of importance, shrewdness, and wit, which makes him the sovereign of his little world.

And Brer Rabbit is, in essence, the Negro himself, acting, talking, and thinking as a Negro. Why so timid an animal as the rabbit should have been selected for the chief role in the play is explained by Harris himself;

"It needs no scientific investigation to show why he (the Negro) selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischievousness. Indeed, the parallel between the 'weakest' of all animals, who must, perforce, triumph through his shrewdness, and the humble condition of the slave raconteur, is not without its pathos and its poetry."

Harris declared that his object in writing the stories was not literary perfection, but rather to invest his characters "with a certain nobility of purpose, a certain pathos that shall relate them to human nature, or to a series of incidents that belong to human nature." The very artlessness of the story-teller proves his consummate art, for he produces such a convincing atmosphere, his pictures of plantation life are so vivid, and the character touches so real, that the reader finds himself transported into a world which has such a reality of its

own that on closing the book he awakes to his actual surroundings with a start.

True, too, to the Negro's dramatic instinct, is the manner in which the story leads up to its startling climax.

One of Harris's warmest admirers was the late Theodore Roosevelt, who, while President, was determined to get "Uncle Remus" to visit him. Thanks to skillful strategy on the part of Harris's son, Julian, "Uncle Remus" was actually one day delivered at the door of the White House. Once he was inside, the habitual shyness seems to have been conquered by his irrepressible and admiring host. A thoroughly "bully" time was had, and it was noted that the lights in the President's library burned far into the night.

Roosevelt later wrote, with reference to "Uncle Remus":

"Where Mr. Harris seems to me to have done one of the greatest services is that he has written what exalts the South in the mind of every man who reads it, and yet what has not a flavor of bitterness toward any other part of the Union. There is not an American anywhere who, on reading his writings, does not rise up with a more earnest desire to do his part in solving American problems right."

And of Harris literary art he said:

"The writings of Joel Chandler Harris gave me as they gave to so many thousands of others, something that I got nowhere else . . . I certainly do not care for books that do not have what I regard as literary worth, the quality which entitles them to a place in literature proper, but neither do I care for them greatly, as a rule, unless they have in them something else also; unless one feels moved by something high and fine, so that one feels braver and gentler, with keener indignation against wrong, and more sensitive sympathy for suffering, because of having read them . . .

"Aside from the immortal Brer Rabbit stories, and the children's stories, many of his sketches were among the most striking and powerful contributions to literature that have been produced on this side of the ocean. And not one leaves a bad taste in the mouth! Not one teaches us to admire success unworthily achieved, nor triumphant evil, nor anything that is base or hard."

Admiring letters poured in on Harris from all over the world. Of children he was particularly fond, and up to the last year of his life we find him carrying on a delightful correspondence with some

of his little readers. Again and again he insisted upon the duty of preserving childhood's beautiful visions from the killing blight of a cold and sordid materialism.

In the fullness of his powers, and surrounded by an adoring family circle, Joel Chandler Harris, after a brief illness, laid away his pen forever on July 3, 1908. He sleeps in beautiful Westview cemetery, beneath a huge boulder of Georgia granite, on which are inscribed, beneath the simple name and dates, these charming words from the dedication of one of the editions of "Uncle Remus":

"I seem to see before me the smiling faces of thousands of children—some young and fresh, and some wearing the friendly marks of age, but all children at heart—and not an unfriendly face among them! And while I am trying hard to speak the right word, I seem to hear a voice lifted above the rest, saying: 'You have made some of us happy.' And so I feel my heart fluttering and my lips trembling, and I have to bow silently, and turn away and hurry into the obscurity that fits me best."

A fitting epitaph is this for Joel Chandler Harris, the writer and the man.